1

BASICS

1.0

The clarity of your thoughts determines the success of your effort.

But clarity is not enough. Your message must get your reader *involved*. (sec. 1.2.4).

1.1

Canadian Marshall McLuhan created a stir in the advertising world with his slogan, "The medium is the message." I disagree. The medium is *not* the message, any more than you are the vehicle that brought you here today. The medium is a *delivery system*, a conveyance, a carrier (the Internet, telephone, radio, letter, newspaper, smoke signal, or carrier pigeon). What goes over or through those is the *message*: sounds, words, symbols, or colors that comprise a *thought*; a notion the originator wants the receiver to know, to use, to share, or to pass on.

An idea is worthless locked into the mind of its generator. To be of any value to society, its originator must transmit it to other people, communicating by words, sounds, or gestures. In this volume I deal only with words, since nonverbal communication is a wholly different subject outside the scope of this present discussion.

Technical and administrative communications are facets of human communication; thus the *objective* of this entire volume is to prove that *a communication must convey a thought in its entirety and unchanged from one mind to another*.

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1.2

A while ago I gave a talk to the annual meeting of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants. Before even a "Good morning," I started with, "Would everyone please raise both hands." Surprised, the audience, still for a moment, began to do just that. Soon enough, when all hands were up, I bade them to relax. I went on to tell them they had just helped me demonstrate four basic notions about communication (sec. 1.2.1–1.2.4).

1.2.1

First: The use of an *amenity*. Remember I asked *please*. It may have blown by in the shock of the request, but it did register on their subconscious, and without knowing why, they did comply. An amenity included in an instruction, a request, or an order (even though they "have to," they feel better about it) helps to penetrate your target's barrier of receiver resistance (sec. 1.7.1), making him a little less unwilling to receive your message.

1.2.2

Second: Word use level. Your communication should be worded to your receiver's comprehension level, generally based on his education. Don't flaunt your erudition to a laborer, nor patronize a nanotechnologist. Be *simple* (easy to comprehend), not *simplistic* (couched in head-patting terms). In ordinary English, I asked that CPA audience, "Please raise both hands." Had I said, "Stick 'em up," some may have, but most would not, while questioning my sanity. But there is no difference in sense of meaning between those two requests. The difference is in the level of the wording (sec. 1.7.2).

If I were to have walked into that room (1) saying absolutely nothing, but brandishing a loaded and cocked Uzi, it wouldn't have taken long for everyone to raise both hands. The Uzi would have done the communicating for my silent armed self (a communication without words).

If I had entered that room (2) packing that same loaded Uzi and loudly demanded, "Stick 'em up!" maybe that might have gotten some attention a bit sooner, but the audience would have raised both hands.

Had I entered (3) with both my hands at my sides, unarmed as I was, and shouted, "Stick 'em up," the audience might have snickered, perhaps a bit confused, but no one would have lifted a finger.

The fourth instance, I've already described: I asked, "Please raise both hands," and they all did.

The point to that exercise is, in the first two instances with or without the message, clearly the Uzi would evoke the positive reaction. To verify,

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the third instance was the same as the second, but without the Uzi, and that *message* would provoke no compliance. But when I changed the wording of the message to the group comprehension level, it did get the result, without the persuader.

1.2.3

Third: The hands bit demonstrated a complete communication. I had an idea in mind, *to see the audience seated*, *with both hands up*. I transmitted that idea orally, that was all I could do. The rest was up to the receivers. First, they had to be willing to accept the message. Once willing, they accepted, then received the message. Once received and read (or heard), they understood it. Thus understanding the message, they reacted positively, and up came the hands.

There does *not* have to be a verbal (spoken or written; sec. 1.8.2) response to a communication, if the reaction is a positive response to the original message. Seeing the audience with hands up—my original thought—made it a complete communication. QED (*quod erat demonstrandum*, which was to be demonstrated).

1.2.4

Fourth: By raising their hands, they were all *participating* in that presentation; ergo, they were *involved* (sec. 1.0).

1.3 CONCEPTS: THE SKELETON OF A MESSAGE

You could regard any communication as a unique, three-dimensional, cubic entity, with direction and aspiration. If the cube were a physical thing, by universal convention its dimensions would be length, width, and height. You might wish to call them hither, thither, and yon, or whatever else you'd like, but every one concerned *must* know in advance what your names *mean*, so all are simultaneously at the same page and paragraph. Figure 1.3 gives you the key to what all these dimensions are called, what they mean, and how they all fit together.

Consider standing in a cubic room (fig. 1.3), looking at the north wall, Logical Basis (sec. 1.4); the east wall, Material Substance (sec. 1.6) is on your right; and the floor beneath you is dimension three, Minimum Standard of Acceptability (sec. 1.7). Each dimension consists of several elements.

1.4 LOGICAL BASIS (WHY WRITE) (SEC. 2.1.2)

Logical basis is the first of the three dimensions of a complete communication. *Before* you contemplate complying with a writing assignment, if the

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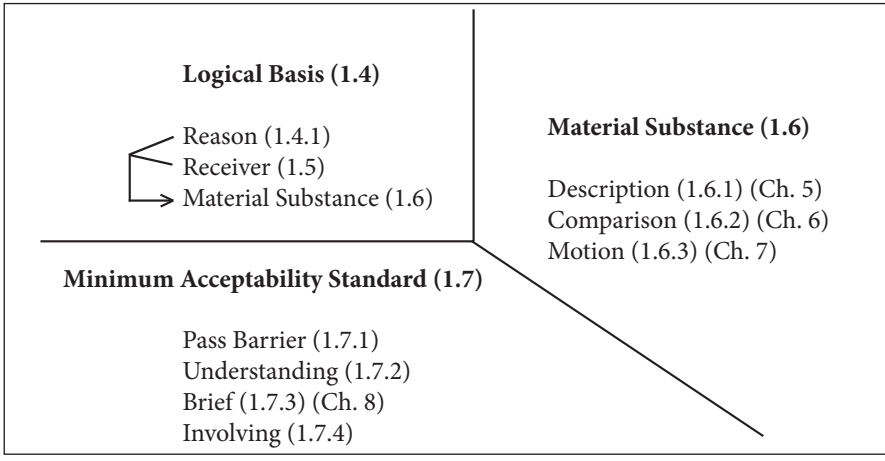
FIGURE 1.3. MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF A MESSAGE



first thing you think of is anything other than asking yourself, *why am I writing this*? you are starting without the foundation of a logical basis. And the answer is *not* "If I don't write it, I'll get fired" or "lose a client." Those answers are *motivations*, not reasons for writing.

From my first teaching year's student work, I took the 200 odd individual reasons they offered and sorted them into generic groups of similar or like nature. Three rounds of re-sorting yielded the same six generic groups. The general nature or sense of direction of each group yielded its category name. As the years went on, student reasons for writing never yielded a single one that could not fit into one of those six categories. Ergo, experience showed the answer to "why write?" is any variation of one or more of these six categories.

1.4.1 TO INFORM

To tell your reader as much as required about the subject of his inquiry, or to inform in general as in a published article. The difference between information and instruction is, information tells *what ought to be done*, instruction tells *how to do it* (sec. 2.1.21).

1.4.2 TO INSTRUCT

To tell *how* to accomplish what needs doing (sec. 2.1.22).

1.4.3 TO INFLUENCE

To try to steer a reader's thinking in the specific direction *you* would prefer. To enhance the importance of some entity. This may be the only way to get your opinion heard when writing *up*, as "You might wish to consider . . ."

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A proposal is successful, and you win the job, *only* if you *influence* the receiver sufficiently to agree that yours is the best among the other competitors. Compose your proposals carefully (sec. 2.1.23).

1.4.4 TO CONTROL

When you are an information source, or in a position of authority writing *down* (always add a "please"). To make a necessary or valuable point. *Never* write anything in anger (sec. 2.1.24).

1.4.5 TO CRITICIZE

Before you do, you should be in a position to be able to criticize, then be able to defend your stance. I lay out a complete discussion on the writing and use of criticism in chapter 17 (sec. 2.1.25).

1.4.6 TO RECORD

You should copy your finished document to the archive, and for your own files, especially if it is a group effort and there is a dissenting opinion within. Write for the record if you want to block something. If your writing is a criticism, it should go on record for both attribution and responsibility. Those *copies* should go to authority. Also, to claim yourself as that idea's originator (sec. 2.1.26).

1.5 RECEIVER (TO WHOM)

The second principal matter (sec. 2.1.3), which along with *why write*? combines to determine their dependent function, *material substance*. Writing a proposal, a report, a letter (chap. 18), or a paper for presentation (chap. 13) is different from writing an article (chap. 15) or a book (chap. 16). The most significant departure in the later groups are, in effect, addressed "to whom it may concern," any reader, while you write items in the earlier group targeted to the specific interests of a specific audience.

To decide the language of the message to your target reader, you must add into the mix the considerations mentioned in section 1.5.2. There are no two projects that are "cookie cutter" identical; each job has a life of its own and is different from another, as delineated in the next six categories of receivers.

1.5.1 THE APPARENT AUDIENCE

The apparent audience (sec. 2.1.31) is the person whose name *appears* as the addressee of record (the dean, the district manager, the commanding

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officer). He is, per protocol, the de facto recipient of correspondence on behalf of the organization. He might not really read your missive; he may delegate the reading, action, and response and may never actually see it. In most cases he is not your target audience.

1.5.2 THE REAL AUDIENCE

The real audience (sec. 2.1.32) is your actual targeted receiver, the one *to whom* you are writing. He is the one the apparent addressee has delegated to read, act upon, and respond to your message, if it is an organizational situation. If he is an individual, then he is at once both the apparent and real audience (sec 1.5.3).

To achieve the maximum results from your message, you must learn as much as you can about your real reader: Who *is* he? What is his background and his education? What are his current surroundings? What is his focused point of attention? And, what is his *knowledge datum*? You must consider the answers to all those questions to form your message. If you write *too high*, he may not comprehend completely, become frustrated, and either ask someone else (who you are not addressing) or just pitch it. If you write *too low*, before your message gets up to his knowledge datum, he'll become impatient and pitch it. You need to determine at the outset what he needs to know, and what he wants to know from you.

1.5.3 THE INDIVIDUAL AUDIENCE

The individual audience is your real reader; thus every detail discussed in section 1.5.2 applies (sec. 2.1.33).

1.5.4 MULTIPLE AUDIENCES (SEC. 2.1.34)

This section is *not* about a message addressed to an individual reader (sec. 1.5.3), who then passes it along to one or more additional people (sec. 1.5.5). Rather it concerns one single communication addressed to a connected receiving group acting as a unit on the same level. I can illustrate that point best by detailing this situation:

As a principal in an engineered-construction firm, you wrote a proposal in response to a request for proposal (RFP) from a small city to design and construct a wastewater treatment plant as a turnkey job. Although not the lowest-priced bidder, you won because you were resourceful, then strategically used good judgment with the information you found. All the losers submitted one-size-fits-all bids that never "reached" the adjudicating body, the city council.

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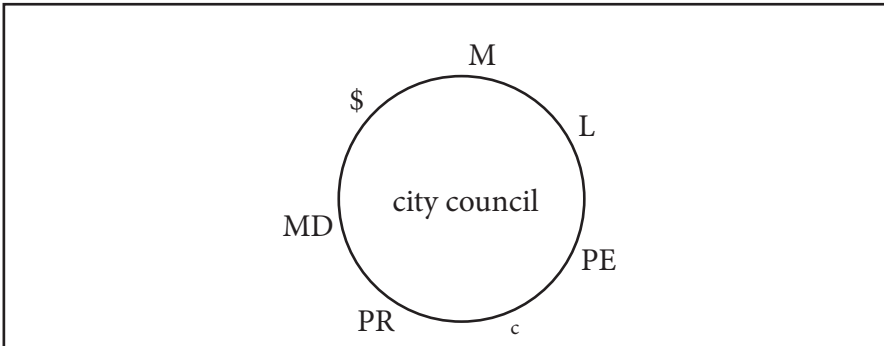
That group (fig. 1.5.4) consisted of the mayor (M), whose main concern was the effect that the project would have on his image at the ballot box come November; the city comptroller ($), whose interest was in seeing how much the city could get for the least money spent; the city attorney (L), whose interest was in seeing how much the city could get for *no* money spent; the city health officer (MD), whose genuine preoccupation was the people's good health; the city engineer (PE), who cared about supervising the construction, getting the plant on line, and learning the operation and maintenance of it after the contractor left; the city communications director (PR), who worried about how many inches of ink this project would get in the paper at the state capital; and the citizen taxpayer (c), who wondered what benefit he would gain for his increased tax dollars.

Looking at the council's constituency (fig. 1.5.4) and considering each member's concerns, you realize that a simple proposal detailing every necessary aspect would become a horrendous task of wasted effort because not every member will digest the entire text, nor its implications. Perhaps because of differing interpretations it might even be counterproductive (as it was with the losers). Instead, you evaluated the concerns of each and thought the ones most responsibly involved were the PE and MD; thus you wisely decided to focus your bid on those two, without so stating in the text: don't let anyone feel ignored. You added as one appendix a detailed full spreadsheet with notes expressly expanded for $, since that was all he really needed and wouldn't be involved in the details of anything else. Your (correct) thinking was that no single proposal would gratify everyone, so if you focused on two individuals (MD and PE) and thoroughly informed $ about his interest, the rest would go along. They did.

FIGURE 1.5.4. SINGLE COMMUNICATION TO MULTIPLE AUDIENCES



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The same procedure can be applied to a graduate student faced with presenting his thesis to his faculty committee. He won't please them all, but by focusing, he *can* please his champion.

1.5.5 PRIMARY-LEVEL AUDIENCE (SEC. 2.1.35)

This is the antithesis of the multiple audience discussed in section 1.5.4. This section deals with one message on a single subject to several people who may be on different levels. You focus it to the comprehension and knowledge levels of the primary person in an ad hoc group of various levels, all of whom get copies. You may add an appendix, expanded with details, for another member of the group, but on the same level as the report. Thus the message is targeted to the primary receiver, and the rest have to read it (up or down), and the receiver replies on behalf of the group. For instance, an executive of an electronics equipment manufacturer generates an idea for a new product he thinks will do well. He issues a request to his chief engineer to ascertain if it can be fabricated in-house. He sends copies to budgeting, to advertising, and to marketing, but the message is on the engineer's level. The others have to read it (up or down) and hold it as a heads-up for later contact, and for input to the primary for his reply.

1.5.6 SUBORDINATE LEVELS

Subordinate levels are the recipients of the primary message (sec. 1.5.5), not necessarily on the primary recipient's level, but understandable to them. The original message also may contain some material for or about any one on the list other than the primary receiver. In effect it is as if they were reading the message over the shoulder of the primary receiver (sec. 2.1.36).

1.6 MATERIAL SUBSTANCE

Depending upon why you write (sec. 1.4), and to whom (sec. 1.5), your finished product, the meat, your *message*, is comprised of three elements: descriptions, comparisons, and motion. If you compose them skillfully, they will convey your ideas to your reader in his most easily understood form.

1.6.1 DESCRIPTIONS

Descriptions tell what things *are*. From them your reader should be able to envision precisely every entity you relate.

A detailed discussion on the composition and use of *description* is laid out in chapter 5.

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1.6.2 COMPARISONS

Comparisons tell what things are *like* or what they may be worth: the relative merits of two or more entities with regard to each other, or with regard to a given standard. You will find a detailed discussion on the composition and use of *comparisons* laid out in chapter 6.

1.6.3 MOTION

Motion (including instructions) tells how things *move*. Descriptions and comparisons are *static*. There is a detailed discussion on the composition and use of *motion* in chapter 7.

1.7 MINIMUM STANDARD OF ACCEPTABILITY

You can achieve only *half* a complete communication. All *you* can do is construct a message and issue it via a medium. It is then out of your hands. For example, a quarterback heaves a pass to a potential receiver. Downfield his tight end wants to catch it, he does, then he knows to tuck it in and run with it. Similarly, to complete your communication, your target reader must *want* to receive your message, read it, understand it, and react to it. *The degree of receiver reaction determines the success of your message*. There are several things you must do to achieve your goal.

1.7.1 PASS HIS BARRIER OF RECEIVER RESISTANCE

Today, everyone has barriers up to shield himself from the ceaseless barrage of unsolicited material, spam, and junk mail. Herein lies the philosophical conflict built into human relations. Simply said, everyone in our society guards his right of privacy, and also enjoys his freedom of expression. For you to exercise your right of free speech, you must infringe upon your receiver's right of privacy. And for him to maintain his right of privacy, he curtails your freedom of speech. The resolution, of course, is in compromise and reasonability. You must attract your potential receiver with an amenity, or with an interesting title, headline, or lead line, or tell him early on what he gains from reading your complete message.

1.7.2 BE UNDERSTOOD

Once past your reader's resistance barrier, your now-willing reader must understand what he reads, to be able to put your message to mutual advantage. Addressing him on both his proper comprehension and knowledge levels (sec. 1.2.2) is the only way to write: too complex or too simplistic and you lose him.

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1.7.3 BE BRIEF

No one enjoys reading voluminous copy unless he needs to, or he is immersed in the subject. Make your communication *commensurate in size* with the *value of the message* it carries (chap. 11). You cannot always produce a document as tight as you would like, but stay with the information you want to convey; avoid including abundant peripheral or unrelated material. In chapter 8 I lay out a method for shrinking your communication while still retaining all relevant substance. But take care you don't brief your message out of existence.

1.7.4 GET YOUR READER INVOLVED

Assuming your target *does* read all you've written, then shrugs, puts it aside, and dismisses it from his mind, you have lost your point. Worse, you've wasted his time, and yours. By reading your effort, he is "hooked." Now your document must reel him in and cause him to go along with whatever your message seeks. Your improved writing style (chap. 3) helps you to follow fast after passing his barrier. Once you have his attention, expand on your theme. Just like that, you have him involved.

1.8 DIRECTION

A complete communication follows this critical path (fig. 1.8): origin, transmittal, receipt, response.

1.8.1 ORIGIN

You conceive an idea, or find new information, or respond to another's message. This is the notion you have in mind. To be useful it has to get out.

1.8.2 TRANSMITTAL

Verbal means *the use of words*, *both spoken and written*. Thus you compose your message according to all the suggestions in this book. Then you issue it, *vocally* or in writing, via your choice of medium. That is all you can do: generate a notion, organize it, and send it off. The rest is up to your receiver.

1.8.3 RECEIPT

Your intended receiver must be willing to accept your message or it goes nowhere. Or, by consent, he does receive it, reads it, understands it, then reacts.

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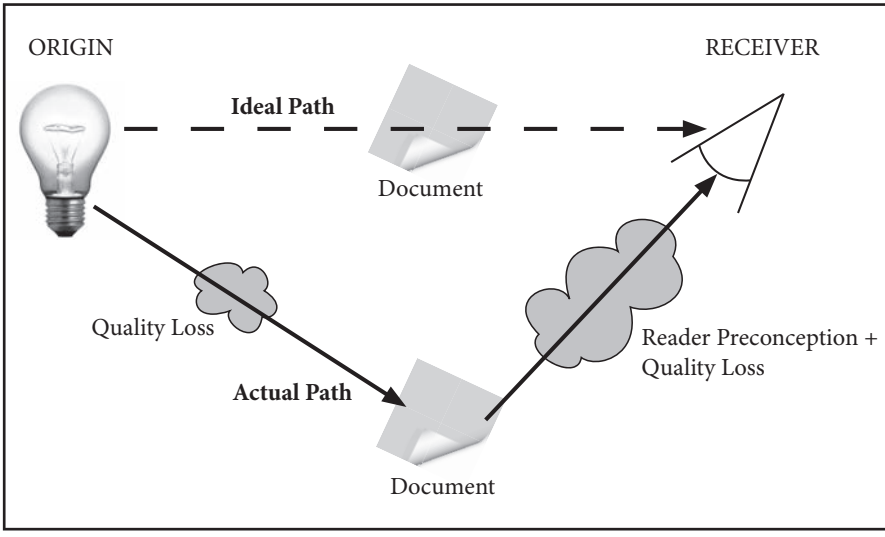
FIGURE 1.8. PATH OF A COMPLETE COMMUNICATION



1.8.4 RESPONSE

His reaction to your message determines his reply, and the success of your message. It could be yea, nay, or tabled. His reply does not necessarily have to be verbal: an *action* could suffice. But by that responsive reaction, he makes the transmittal of your idea a complete communication.

1.9 CLARITY

Refer again to Figure 1.8. The incandescent light bulb (upper left) is symbolic of the human mind. When the mind generates an idea, the light goes on. To be of value, the idea must be transmitted somewhere. When the notion of specific gravity tumbled to the bathing Archimedes, allegedly he ran wet and naked through the streets of ancient Syracuse shouting, "Eureka, I've found it!" Today the constabulary takes a dim view of streaking. Besides, now we have many more ways beyond the town crier to broadcast news. The printed page (lower center) is one. The willing reader (upper right) ingests the message. Theoretically the receiver should then (dashed line) have the same mental image as the sender, but most often he does not.

Between the sender's mind and what he commits to the paper, there naturally occurs a modicum of loss of quality, a bit of clouding. Thus the printed record of the image is slightly less acute than the sender's original thought.

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No person is devoid of feelings. That built-in prejudice, however small, has some subconscious effect on receptive thinking. That in turn causes more clouding and more loss of quality from paper to mind. This clouding, added to the clouding from the originator to the paper, leaves a diminished transmittal. Your task is to try to make the thought you send as nearly perfect and as carefully crafted as your talent and skill allow, then the loss of message quality is all on the reader.

People don't read what they see, they read what they think they would like to see (the clouding from paper to the reader's mind). That is the principal cause of receiver message clouding. Long ago I was driving from here to there with my then ten-year-old son. We stopped for a red light beside an auto supply store. He saw a store window sign and asked me, "Papa, why is *that* store selling *muffins and pies*?" I looked, and told him to read it again. He did. The sign appropriately offered *mufflers and pipes*. It turned out that he was hungry; that subconsciously became foremost in his thinking, clouding the transmitted idea.

Another time I was an expert witness for a lawyer in a traffic case. He harbored an unfortunate deep dislike for traffic policemen. In the ready-room he picked up a stray copy of a newsletter and seriously said, "Look at them, now they even have a publication, *The Retarded Patrolman*." Scanning what he handed me, I was moved to say, "Come on, Jake, that's *The Retired Patrolman*."

An invitation to a dinner meeting offered a choice among three entrée selections; one was "Half roasted chicken." Who would eat semiraw meat? Or, if they meant, "Roasted half chicken," was the other half badger? The confusion vanishes simply by the addition of an *a*, "Half *a* roasted chicken."

Those are preconceived receiver notions that must be overcome. Take the time to write what you *mean*, what you intend to be read. If you think them through and organize your ideas carefully, your message will be transmitted clearly via your chosen medium to your reader. The clearer your thoughts, the more transparent your message, and the more successful it will be.

. . . COMMUNICATION, DRAWS ALL, EVEN THE MOST BARBARIAN NATIONS, INTO CIVILIZATION.[1]

NOTE

1. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (New York: Penguin 1967; orig. pub. German 1848, English 1888).

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